



**Land Acquisition and Airspace Establishment Project  
Project Overview Paper — Issue 10 — June 2018  
Marine Air Ground Task Force Training Command  
Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center  
Twentynine Palms, CA**



### **Background- Purpose and Need**

The Marine Corps is the Nation's expeditionary force. Marines must train as they fight in order to be successful in deploying as a force in readiness anywhere in the world. Realistic training gives Marines the best chance to successfully meet their mission in combat and return safely home. Continuously improving military training will always be vital in overcoming military threats. Lessons learned in combat over previous decades, the improved ranges of new weapons systems and equipment, increased capabilities of the Nation's potential adversaries, and anticipation of future military needs, Marine Corps doctrine identified Marine Expeditionary Brigades (MEB) as the Marine Corps primary contingency task force in 2001. The Marine Requirements Oversight Council (MROC) developed specific training requirements based on this concept in order to prepare Marines for what they will encounter in combat operations in 2006. These training requirements specified the need for enough land and airspace to accommodate three battalions simultaneously maneuvering in close coordination using combined-arms (i.e., air/ground), live fire for a 48-72 hour training period; essentially to train a MEB in the way that it would operate in combat.

Adequate training land and airspace to achieve these requirements did not exist at any installation in the country. As a result, the Marine Corps studied alternatives for land acquisition and accompanying Special Use Airspace (SUA) that could support these requirements. A Marine Corps study conducted by the Center for Naval Analyses (CNA) analyzed MEB training requirements and assessed three regions of the country for their capability to support sustained MEB training. It found the Southwest most suitable, but it showed that achieving the required sustained, combined-arms live-fire maneuver MEB training capability, without distributed operations (i.e., spread over multiple bases) and representational forces, could only be achieved by expanding the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center (MCAGCC), Twentynine Palms, CA.

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### **Project Alternatives and the NEPA Process**

MCAGCC, along with the Marine Corps Training and Education Command (TECOM), studied the MROC guidance in great depth to determine that lands studied could truly support the MEB training requirements. In studying ways to fulfill the MEB training requirement, the Marine Corps wanted to ensure that only those lands necessary to meet the MEB training requirements would be acquired through any eventual land acquisition and Special Use Airspace establishment approved after the NEPA process and issuance of any ROD supporting such acquisition. As noted, the Marine Corps studied areas east, west, north and south of the base for their training suitability. Areas to the base's north were determined to be unsuitable due to terrain, infrastructure and lack of MEB training value.

An application for withdrawal of public lands for military training was submitted to the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to study areas adjacent to MCAGCC on the east, west and south of the base, approximately 420,000 acres of federal and non-federal land. BLM issued a segregation notice on September 15, 2008, to reserve the federal public lands from competing future claims while the Department of the Navy completed the NEPA process. The BLM and the Marine Corps held public meetings on the withdrawal application in October 2008 and have worked with stakeholders to allow uses such as recreation to continue during the study period.

The NEPA process required the Marine Corps to study reasonable alternatives for meeting its requirements, and to assess the impacts of the proposed alternatives on natural and socio-economic resources within those study areas. Five alternatives for meeting MEB-level training, and a No Action Alternative, were released to the public for review and comment during the EIS scoping period. Three public scoping meetings were held in the first week of December 2008 and nearly 20,000 public comments were received on the proposed alternatives and issues to be studied during the EIS scoping and BLM comment periods.

As a result of analyzing these comments, aligning the study areas more closely with terrain features, eliminating lands with minimal training value, and reducing the number of occupied affected private parcels, the Department of the Navy sent a notice to BLM relinquishing the Marine Corps interest in some of the segregated lands. As a result, approximately 60,000 acres were removed from the EIS study areas to the east, south and west of MCAGCC. About 360,000 total acres remained in the areas that were studied in the EIS.

In addition to the refinements in each of the five alternatives presented to the public during scoping resulting from public comments and further study, a sixth alternative was developed in response to public comments that accommodated public access to some of the lands in the west study area when Marines were not using the area for MEB training.

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Set out below are maps and basic descriptions of the three most viable alternatives that were studied in the EIS, a fourth map shows the no action alternative that would not meet MEB level requirements. These alternatives were developed in response to how they met Critical Training Requirements for MEB sustained, combined-arms live-fire maneuver training and other evaluation criteria. The Critical Training Requirements were identified as:

- Three Battalion Task Forces abreast converging onto a MEB objective
- 48-72 hours of continuous offensive operations toward the MEB objective
- Integrated air and ground live fires with optimized freedom of action (within reasonable constraints)

The other evaluation criteria were that the land and airspace would allow for:

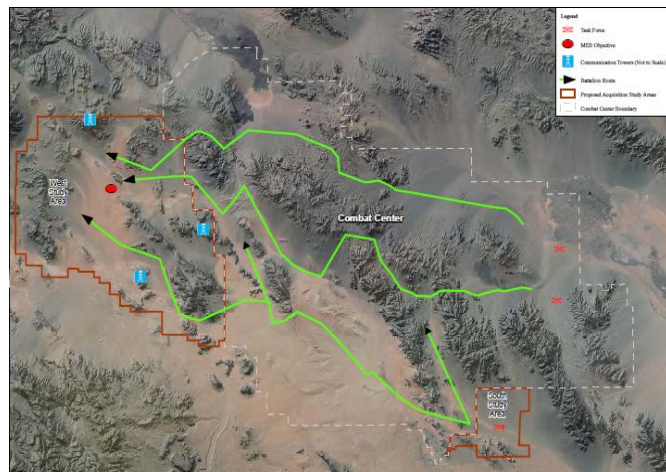
- Employment of current/future weapons systems and munitions
- Employment of tactical communications/logistics over extended distances
- Contiguity with current MCAGCC
- Avoiding parks, critical habitat, wildlife refuges and wilderness areas
- 1000 meter buffer between live-fire areas and the base boundary

**Land Alternative 1 (West/South)**

**201,657 acres**

**180,353 acres west/21,304 acres south**

- Maneuver would start from the east on the current MCAGCC base and the south study area, and the MEB battalions would converge on an objective in the west study area. This alternative would be the best from an operational standpoint

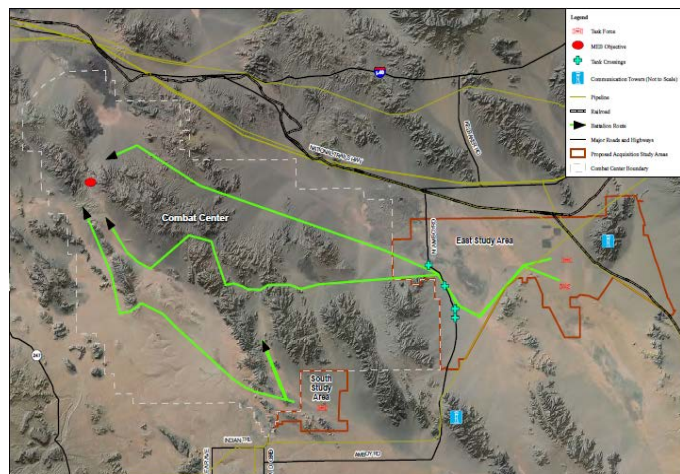


**Land Alternative 3 (South/East)**

**198,580 acres**

**21,304 acres south/177,276 acres east**

- Maneuver would start from the south and east study areas and the MEB battalions would converge on an objective within the current MCAGCC base in the northwest.
- This alternative was preferred by recreationists, as it would have the least impact on lands traditionally used for recreation







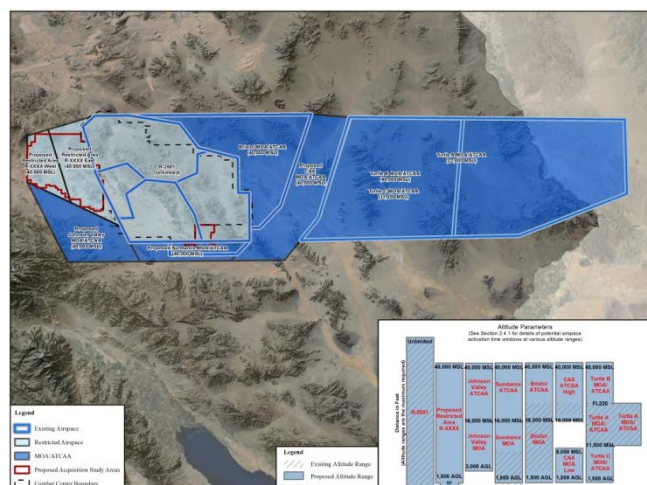
Acquiring additional airspace is also necessary to support sustained, combined-arms live-fire maneuver MEB training. Because of similar geographic footprints among the alternatives studied for potential land acquisition, there were originally only three proposed SUA establishment and modification alternatives - one for Alternatives 1, 4, 5 and 6; one for Alternative 2; and one for Alternative 3. They are set out in the graphics that follow. The Department of the Navy requested to establish additional and modify existing SUA to support the MEB training requirements. The three originally analyzed SUA proposals are set out below (airspace block elevations depicted in the lower right hand corner of the maps are also available in airspace documents on the project website). The types of airspace used in military training at MCAGCC are:

- ♦ **Restricted Area (RA):** A Restricted Area is used to contain the effects of ground-based and airborne weapons systems to ensure public safety. MCAGCC releases RA for use by all aircraft in the National Airspace System when not needed for military training. Restricted Area starts at ground level above the installation footprint, and at 1,500 feet above ground level over non-DoD controlled land, going up to a potentially unlimited ceiling.
- ♦ **Military Operations Area (MOA):** A military operations area is airspace designated outside of Class A airspace (18,000 – 60,000 feet) to separate or segregate certain nonhazardous military activities from Instrument Flight Rule (IFR) traffic and to identify for Visual Flight Rule (VFR) traffic where these activities are conducted.
- ♦ **Air Traffic Control Assigned Airspace (ATCAA):** Air Traffic Control Assigned Airspace (ATCAA), which normally overlays a MOA (at altitudes above 18,000 feet), is like a MOA in that it allows non-military aircraft to be vectored through at the discretion of the local air traffic control authority.

### **Proposed Special Use Airspace under Land Acquisition Alternatives 1, 4, 5 and 6**

***Alternative 6 is the Preferred  
Alternative—Selected in the ROD***

- Would add Western RA to west.
- Would add Western MOA/ATCAA.
- Would add Combined Arms Exercise MOA/ATCAA to east.
- Would expand Sundance MOA/ATCAA to the south, east and west.
- Would add vertically to Sundance, Turtle and Bristol MOAs/ATCAAs.







## NEPA Process—Public Involvement

The Department of the Navy published its Notice of Intent to prepare an EIS in October 2008 and held three public meetings in December 2008 to inform the public of the requirements. Nearly 20,000 public comments were received on the proposed project and five alternatives (and a No Action Alternative) and on substantive issues for study in the EIS.

The Department of the Navy and the Marine Corps analyzed these comments to develop a range of reasonable alternatives for meeting Marine Corps MEB training requirements. These comments contributed to the refinement of the five alternatives presented to the public during scoping and to the development of a sixth alternative that accommodates east-to-west maneuver as well as public access to some of the lands in the West Study Area when Marines will not use the area for MEB training. This range of reasonable alternatives, and a No Action Alternative, were studied in preparation of a Draft EIS that was released on February 25, 2011. Three public comment meetings were held in the region and over 650 people attended the meetings held in Joshua Tree, Ontario, and Victorville. Nearly 22,000 public comments were received on the Draft EIS and were evaluated in preparation of the Final Environmental Impact Statement (Final EIS).

The Department of the Navy prepared and released on July 27, 2012 the Final EIS that evaluated the environmental impacts associated with the proposed alternatives for land acquisition and Special Use Airspace establishment and modification, and proposed appropriate mitigation for unavoidable impacts. The BLM and FAA were cooperating agencies in producing the EIS. Other agencies and a broad range of interested stakeholders for the proposed project have participated in various stages of preparing the Draft and Final EIS, including providing scoping comments on the alternatives and issues to be studied. Overall, more than 42,000 public comments were received throughout the EIS process, including nearly 1,000 on the Final EIS itself.

The Marine Corps and MCAGCC are committed to cultural and natural resource protection, environmental stewardship, and being a “good neighbor” to the community; these values were taken into account when evaluating the land alternatives. The EIS and its public comments enabled the Department of the Navy and the Marine Corps to make the best decision to meet Marine Corps MEB training requirements.

## **Making a Decision**

The NEPA process led the Department of the Navy to a decision, and that final decision was based on environmental impacts evaluated in the EIS, costs, and mission training requirements. The Final EIS, in accordance with Council on Environmental Quality regulations, included appropriate mitigation measures not already included as part of the alternatives or yet identified in the Draft EIS and further mitigation was devised after review of public comments on the Final EIS and in consultation with BLM.

Alternative 6 was selected as the Preferred Alternative in the Draft EIS, and this selection was maintained in a slightly altered form in the Final EIS. Alternative 6 was not the best alternative from a training perspective, or the best from an environmental perspective. It was the preferred alternative because it was the optimal alternative considering operational and environmental impact factors together. Alternative 6 was developed in response to public comments to preserve public access to important off-highway recreation areas during periods when MEB training did not require use of that land.

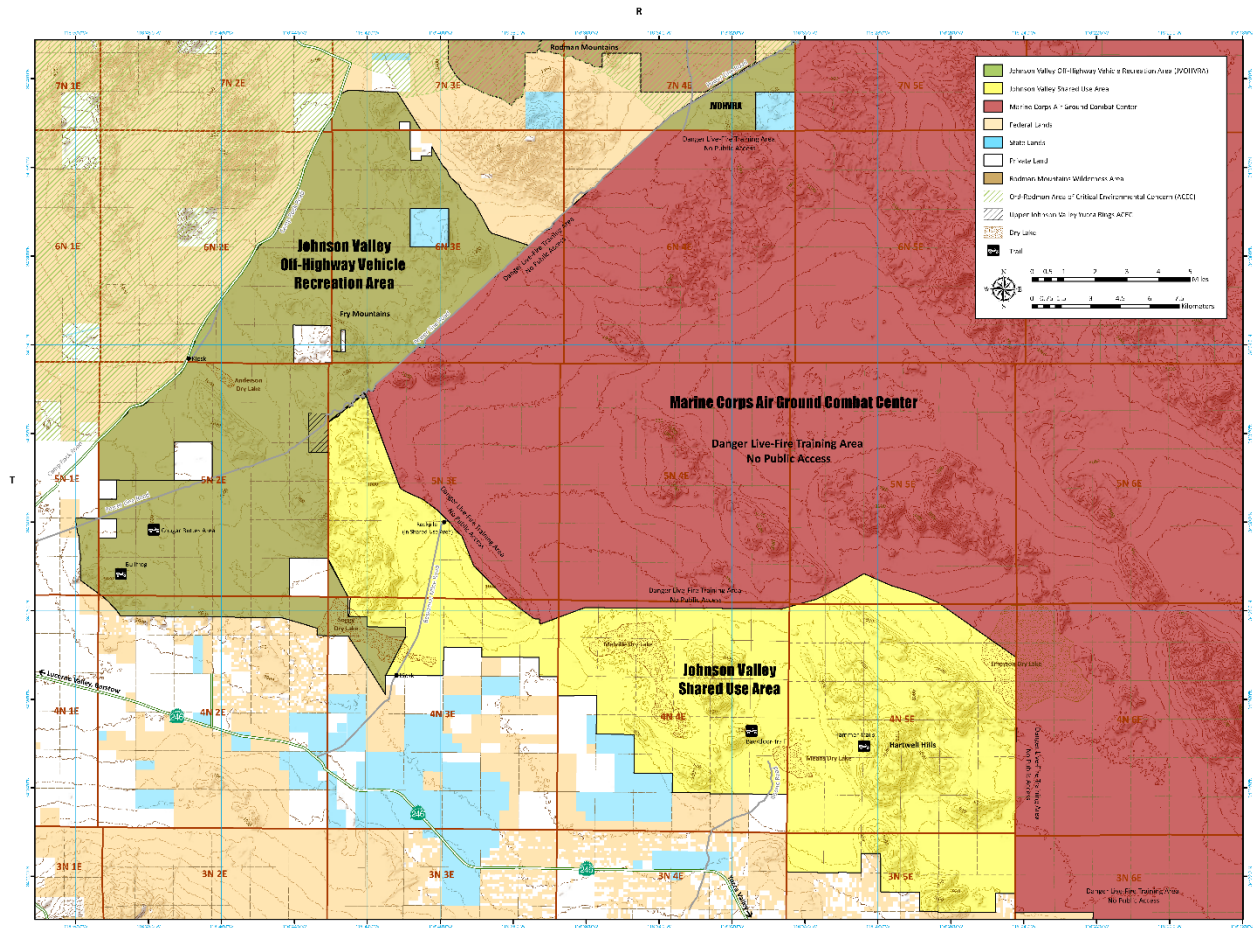
After evaluation of public comments on the Final EIS, the Department of the Navy (DoN) made its decision and published its ROD on February 15, 2013. The ROD was published in the Federal Register and local newspapers. It officially deemed Alternative 6 as the Selected Alternative that was presented to Congress for approval.

## **FY2014 National Defense Authorization Act**

Following the ROD, in the spring of 2013 the DoN submitted a completed application to Congress to withdraw public lands in order to support Marine Corps training requirements. The proposal was received, slightly modified and signed into law by Congress and the President within the National Defense Act for Fiscal Year 2014 in December of 2013. The legislation modified the Selected Alternative 6 to enable the Marine Corps to conduct MEB level live-fire training and also increase the land available for recreation in the Shared Use Area from the original approximate 43,000 proposed acres to an approximate 56,000 acres (when including purchase of non-federal land). The law also expanded the base by an additional 107,000 acres for exclusive military use, via acquisition of federal land and purchase of non-federal land. Additionally the legislation designated approximately 43,000 acres as the Johnson Valley Off-Highway Vehicle Recreation Area, available for recreation year-round, preserving this area for recreation in perpetuity. The following map outlines the finalized boundaries as a result of the FY2014 NDAA, slightly modified from the Selected Alternative of the ROD.



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The Congressional alternative allows the Marine Corps to meet training requirements while preserving land for recreational use

The Congressional decision for these land use changes necessitated the purchase of non-federal lands that were within the acquisition area. All private or state lands within the plan area have been evaluated for fair market value and are already acquired or in negotiations.

Additionally, mandated by the legislation was the establishment of the Resource Management Group (RMG), for the cooperative management of the Shared Use Area. The RMG was activated via Charter in June 2014, and is a collaborative effort between the MCAGCC and BLM. Other responsibilities of the RMG include implementing a comprehensive Public Outreach Plan to educate the public on land use changes, solicit input from stakeholders, advise the Secretaries of Navy and Interior as to issues associated with these multiple uses, and to meet at least once per year.

## Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement

The expansion at MCAGCC resulted in the preservation of approximately 15,000 acres of habitat for threatened and/or endangered species within the newly acquired areas, as well as neighboring Areas of Critical Environmental Concern. The desert tortoise population within this newly acquired training land had been identified for translocation in order to sustain their survivability in accordance with the FEIS.

In 2016, in response to various factors and new information available, two alternative translocation plans were developed and studied as part of a Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement, whereas an updated BO was released in January 2017. The Department of Navy selected Alternative 2 in their Record of Decision, the environmentally preferable alternative, in alignment with the BO. The translocation plan described in Alternative 2 was developed using internal USFWS guidance with a focus on augmenting depleted tortoise populations.

In April 2017 929 desert tortoises were translocated in accordance with the Final SEIS. Specially trained Biologists moved the desert tortoise to recipient sites located both within protected areas on DoD lands and on BLM lands near the Combat Center. In October of 2017

the biologists from the Combat Center moved the last of the tortoises, totaling 114.



The ROD additionally committed the Marine Corps to various other measures to protect resident desert tortoises, and the Marine Corps continues to conduct surveys and perform health assessments to support recovery efforts. Other efforts to

support recovery of the desert tortoise include a long-term program to protect hatchlings and juveniles until they grow resilient enough to endure the harsh physical environment, and resist predators of the desert.

## Conclusion

The first Large Scale Exercise took place in newly acquired lands in August 2016, and have been conducted each year since. These exercises have allowed Marines and sailors to practice long-range raids, casualty evacuations, live-fire events, defensive operations, close air support and simulated combat operations in a realistic environment. These scenarios best prepare our Nation's warfighters what to expect when they are deployed to expeditionary environments to defend our nation, its allies and vital interests.



Since then, The Marine Corps and the Department of the Navy have continued work with stakeholders to allow appropriate, continuing public use of public lands, and to notify the public well in advance of training to allow appropriate planning for public use of the Shared Use Area. The Marine Corps plans to continue its good neighbor practices in collaborating with the BLM, local communities, off-highway vehicle and other recreationists, and conservation organizations.

The Marine Corps is currently working with the FAA as well as national, regional and local airspace stakeholders to establish new and modify current SUA to support MAGTF training, including MEB training in the Combat

Center's new range areas. The FAA previously granted Temporary Special Use Airspace to support LSE-17, and the Combat Center has submitted a Controlled Firing Area and a Temporary Special Use Airspace proposal for 2019/2020 to cover exercises in the interim of Permanent Special Use Airspace establishment.